

Mind the Language Gap: Analyzing Cockney Rhyming Slang

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Every summer my husband and I travel back to his hometown of Orion, Illinois: population 1,600. Orion, oddly pronounced “OR-ee-un,” is so small that it is technically called “A Great *Village* to Call Home,” and the closest major retailer is located twenty minutes away through Milan (MY-I’n) to the South Park Mall.

South Park is a terrible mall. The dual-option food court is centrally located and the suffocating aromas of “Chicken on a Stick” waft through the dark, labyrinthine halls that bypass stores selling “Mary’s Moo-Moo” knick-knacks, Hallmark cards, John Deere farming equipment and pastel-colored, XXXL-sized sweaters. The customers are dull, the employees are falsely cheery, and whenever my husband and I get bored enough to actually visit this small shopping mecca, we amuse ourselves by assuming British accents.

We each have specific accents that we stick to. I speak with a sort of British mash-up in which I round my vowels in a feminine imitation of Melvyn Bragg, and my husband, who commonly sports trilby hats and full-zip jackets, affects a Cockney accent. Through years of such escapist entertainment, my husband and I have discovered that Americans treat British people very nicely. (We also discovered, through briefly assuming other nationalities, that Midwesterners treat French people very badly. “Freedom” fries are still on the menu in the local Denny’s.) We thought, until I started researching this paper, that my husband performed a pretty good approximation of a Cockney accent; recently I was forced to inform him that his accent is, in fact, terrible.

The term *Cockney* does not adhere to the movie industry interpretation of East End (London) criminals, but is instead defined as any lower-class Londoner who hails from the area within the sound of the bells of St. Mary Le Bow, a church actually located in Cheapside, which is not technically a part of the East End (McCrum 299). The word originally comes from Middle English *cokeney*, meaning a malformed bird’s egg. In 1521, *cockney* began to be a derogatory term to refer to a town-person who no longer knew country ways, and by 1600 the term was specifically applied to those people who were “born within the sound of Bow bells.” By 1890 the term was extended to all the people who spoke with an East End accent (“Cockney, *n.*” *OED Online*). The misinterpretation of Cockneys as living in the East End came from later interpretations that “the sound of Bow bells”

identified the ringing that came from any of the churches along Bow Road, which divides the East End in half but is certainly outside the range of St. Mary Le Bow's bells.

It is not surprising that the Cockney area was relocated due to a misunderstanding about the language; such misunderstandings are common when dealing with Cockneys, as their accents and their facility in playing with the language can be confusing to outside listeners. Cockneys frequently use double-negatives to

make emphatic (although grammatically incorrect) points, and when Eliza Dolittle sings, "Just you wait, 'Enry 'Iggins, just you wait" in *My Fair Lady*, she is dropping her *h*'s in the traditional Cockney manner. However, double-negatives and dropped *h*'s are not the only linguistic tics separating the Cockneys from other English speakers; Cockneys also replace letters, creating often-mystifying pronunciations. It is common to hear *v* or *rf* sounds replacing

th sounds within Cockney English, as in the sentence, "Me *bruvver* is taking a *barf*" ("My brother is taking a bath"). Before the twentieth century, Cockney speakers also ordinarily switched *v* and *w* sounds, leading to the threat that Sherlock Holmes received: "Go on! . . . So help me gracious, I have a wiper in this bag and I'll drop it on your 'ead if you don't hook it!" (Doyle 146).

In addition to their disconcerting accent, Cockneys also enjoy using Cockney rhyming slang. Although scholars debate the dates of Cockney rhyming slang's origin (1500–1800), they agree that the slang has always been an underground criminal "argot," which David Crystal, a leading linguistic expert, defines as the "special language of a secretive social group" intended to befuddle the police (Crystal 182). To

use rhyming slang, a linked trio (or sometimes a pair) of words are chosen to replace another, entirely different intended word that *does not* have a related meaning, and the last word in the triad must rhyme with the intended word. However, the rhyming word is not used; instead only the first word in the trio is actually spoken. The reason why this sounds complex is because it is complex. In essence, certain lexical words are rhymed with sets of other lexical words, but making sense of the replacement words that appear in a sentence is impossible without having first learned the plethora of rhymes available. *Apples and pears* is a common rhyme for *stairs*, creating the sentence "I'm going up the apples to me apartment" (remember that only the first, non-rhyming word in the trio is used in Cockney rhyming slang). Other commonly used rhymes are *loaf [of bread]* for *head* ("Use your loaf, man!"), *trouble [and strife]* for *wife* ("Me trouble is in the apartment waiting for me"), and *pins [and pegs]* for *legs* ("I almost fell off me pins when she nagged me again!").

Cockney rhyming slang is further confused because different accents create different rhymes. Because Cockneys have such a unique way of speaking, some of their rhymes make no sense to English speakers with different accents. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the term *Charing Cross* has been a rhyme for *horse*, but *cross* does not rhyme with *horse* unless the speaker has a heavy Cockney accent, which makes *cross* sound like *course*. Also, the term *piano* is rhymed with *Joanna*, but is further obscured by the pronunciation "Jo-AN-er" ("Cockney Rhyming Slang"). Rhyming slang is also going through an evolution currently, introducing new rhymes for common words and using both rhymes interchangeably to describe the same term. Therefore, whereas *apples and pears* was the common rhyme for *stairs* thirty years ago, now *Britney Spears* is used as well ("Understanding Cockney Rhyming Slang").

Other countries use Cockney rhyming slang as well, although in a lesser degree. It is thought that the term *brass tacks* is an American version of rhyming slang, meant to replace the word *facts* (Green, "Brass Tacks"). The phrase

WE THOUGHT, UNTIL
I STARTED RESEARCHING
THIS PAPER, THAT MY
HUSBAND PERFORMED
A PRETTY GOOD
APPROXIMATION OF A
COCKNEY ACCENT;
RECENTLY I WAS
FORCED TO INFORM HIM
THAT HIS ACCENT IS, IN
FACT, TERRIBLE.

“blowing a raspberry” is thought to be derived from a rhyme for *raspberry tart*, which rhymes with *fart* (Green, “Raspberry Tart”). Therefore, because other countries and nationalities besides Cockneys sometimes use rhyming slang, it is possible for me to tell you that me frying has the prettiest minces, long, lean bacons, and he eats a lot of holy. He saves me bees.¹ Now you tell me, would that be a dirty thing to say to an overworked employee at the dreaded South Park Mall, or not?



Works Cited

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¹ My frying [pan] (old man/husband) has the prettiest mince [pie]s (eyes), long, lean bacon [and egg]s (legs) and he eats a lot of holy [ghost] (toast). He saves me bees [and honey] (money).